

ASEAN, ADMM AND REGIONAL DEFENCE COOPERATION: HOW SUCCESSFUL HAS IT BEEN IN INDUCING REGIONAL DEFENCE COOPERATION?

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1. From a cursory glance, regional cooperation in Southeast Asia flourished out of the interest in benefitting from mutual development and stability. In fact, that was one of the key contributing factors that went into the formation of ASEAN: to see the improvement of economic, political and social cooperation amidst the backdrop of post-colonialism-induced uncertainty, major power rivalries and the rise of communism.
2. Indeed, for regional security cooperation, and at an even broader level, such as the Asia Pacific, the platitude, if not sheer rhetoric altogether, has been sounded often enough by the global powers that be: the establishment of a regional architecture well-fortified and equipped to ensure that all nations in the Asia-Pacific region are not deprived of the freedom to advance in terms of military vigour and resilience.
3. The mantra goes on to spell out the three key elements of such a regional security architecture: inclusiveness, openness, and transparency. Further, it would fail without a platform for free and open discourse on the issues that impact the region so that collective and collaborative action may be taken. And there's the rub, as they say.
4. That's because the declarations of aspirations on ASEAN regional cooperation have basically shied away from defence-centric language. At the same time, the task of articulation is largely delegated to foreign and trade ministers, or the offices of Prime Ministers, Presidents or other heads of government. As a result, it has conditioned these actors to become averse to venturing into substantial defence cooperation on a wider ASEAN level. They carefully avoided any misconceptions that ASEAN could develop into a military bloc.
5. Historically speaking, Southeast Asia's experience with defence-related collaboration has remained at the bilateral level. Since the 1950s, it has been slow to develop as the issue remains that the majority of ASEAN Member States are not prepared, let alone willing and able, to act for broader strategic matters.

6. Past multilateral examples are the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), an externally-imposed organisation that included only two Southeast Asian countries – the Philippines and Thailand; the Anglo-Malayan/Malaysian Defence Agreement (AMDA); and the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA).
7. Now, as for the FPDA, one could argue that it partially answers the question raised earlier about the quandary of fulfilling aspirations, in that this Arrangement does have a role in promoting, at least constructively, if not directly, the regional security architecture.
8. What stands out more is that individual members states have their security arrangements with different military powers; the Philippines and Thailand are now non-NATO treaty allies of the United States; Malaysia and Singapore are members of the FPDA with Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom; and Brunei has a security arrangement with the United Kingdom after gaining independence in 1984. On the other hand, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar, due to differing political ideologies, as well as different waves of political upheavals, have openly rejected joining any military alliance with any external powers.
9. In light of this, the question then is: how can ASEAN open the path towards a truly holistic outlook on cooperation, where we can include defence elements without perceiving it as pre-empting to conflict?
10. It can be argued that over time, ASEAN's evolution allowed for a natural progression to include defence-related cooperation despite past aversions. It's the "half a loaf is better than none" argument. The foundation has already been laid, sustained by the assumption that an established history of collaboration will open more opportunities for deeper cooperation regardless of its magnitude or sophistication.
11. ASEAN defence establishments gradually made their way into the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994. This complemented ongoing military-to-military cooperative activities such as the ASEAN Chiefs of Army Multilateral Meeting (ACAMM) since 2000; the ASEAN Chiefs of Defence Forces Informal Meeting (ACDFIM) since 2001; the ASEAN Navy Interaction (ANI) since 2001; the ASEAN Air Force Chiefs Conference (AACC) since 2004; the ASEAN Military Intelligence Meeting; the ASEAN Armies Rifles Meeting; and the ASEAN Chiefs of Military Medicine Meeting.

12. The next breakthrough was the Tenth ASEAN Summit in Vientiane, Laos, in November 2004, where ASEAN leaders adopted the ASEAN Security Community Plan of Action. It stipulated that ASEAN should work towards convening an annual Defence Ministers' meeting, which then held its inaugural meeting in Kuala Lumpur in May 2006.
13. The standout feature of the ADMM is that it marked the formalisation of multilateral defence diplomacy and cooperation in the region. It is one of the few platforms that host top-level ministerial defence and security mechanisms directly accountable to the ASEAN leaders. It is also the only platform that annually convenes all ten defence ministers, while previous engagements have been concentrated amongst foreign policy agencies or through direct military-to-military interactions.
14. Such arrangements soon expanded to the ADMM-Plus, a platform for ASEAN and its eight Dialogue Partners (Plus Countries), Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia and the United States. The inaugural ADMM-Plus meeting was convened in Ha Noi, Vietnam, in October 2010.
15. Since 2017, the ADMM-Plus has met annually to allow for enhanced dialogue and cooperation among ASEAN and the Plus Countries to strengthen security and defence cooperation for peace, stability and development in an increasingly challenging regional security environment.
16. In addition to defence-related dialogue and cooperation, they are to advise senior defence and military officials on cooperation within ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners, to build mutual trust and confidence in defence and security issues through the promotion of understanding and transparency, and to further the establishment of the then-named ASEAN Security Community (now known as the Political-Security Community), one of the three pillars of the broader ASEAN 2015 vision. Nevertheless, detractors have pointed out that the ostensible aim "to build mutual trust and confidence in defence and security issues" is yet another platitude incapable of realisation simply because defence and security matters, by definition, are antithetical to trust and sharing. Such trust and confidence would, at best, be superficial.
17. The scepticism notwithstanding, the key areas of cooperation, namely, maritime security, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), peacekeeping operations, military medicine, humanitarian mine action and cybersecurity, largely operate through Experts' Working Groups (EWGs). Each EWG is co-chaired by one ASEAN Member State and one Plus Country in a three-year cycle.

18. As the saying goes, between the idea and the reality, falls the shadow. The aspirations may be adequately conceived and appropriately targeted, but their realisation is an entirely different matter. Hence, despite the activities and oft-stated goals and objectives, several persistent concerns continue to limit the depth and potential of ASEAN's defence cooperation, thereby curtailing the effectiveness of the ADMM and ADMM-Plus.
19. To begin with, much like its parent organisation ASEAN, they are scrutinised for perceived ineffectiveness and shallow levels of engagement. Thus, to retain relevance, the ADMM, ADMM-Plus, and related platforms need a proper appraisal of ongoing concerns and take steps to mitigate the negative perceptions.
20. Given the competition for regional influence, one of the major reasons for institutional weakness is that ASEAN has been unable to regulate this competitive dynamic without jeopardising overall cooperation among ADMM-Plus members. Steps need to be taken to ensure that the interests of Dialogue Partners do not supersede those of the ASEAN member states. Anecdotally, it is said that the DPs tend to be more vociferous in articulating their perspectives and positions to advance their country-centric agenda. It therefore stands to reason that ASEAN member states should factor in considerations to sustain the political will to speak as a collective front and retain control of the ADMM Plus process.
21. These platforms have been rather static. They need to move beyond tackling the less controversial security concerns. They cannot afford to remain stagnant, for staying static in this Fourth Industrial Revolution era is akin to moving backwards. It is imperative to adjust to the new and continuously changing strategic environment and incorporate new areas of cooperation into the ADMM. It also must come with political will, as without it, it will only remain wishful thinking.
22. We have also observed that ASEAN's track record has not been the most encouraging. Particularly in geopolitical and geostrategic import matters, it betrays a penchant for grandiloquent statements of process without much to show in terms of substantive achievements. By way of a caveat, it should be said that this is not an indictment against ASEAN as a whole on account that the other two pillars of the 2015 Vision, namely, the economic and the cultural-social fronts, have seen tangible progress.

23. However, the same cannot be said of the political-security front. For example, in July 2022, Australia, New Zealand and the United States withdrew from the ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Group on Counter-Terrorism purportedly because it was hosted by both Myanmar and Russia. Counter-terrorism and related agenda must be ideologically neutral if anything productive is to be achieved. Setting pre-conditions for discourse is self-defeating. Moreover, the boycott sets a negative precedence as future activities could face further boycotts if they are viewed to be chaired by "unsavoury" partners, thus further reducing the utility and purpose of such platforms.
24. Another weakness is the asymmetry in overall defence capabilities, with external partners of ASEAN having far more extensive capabilities than the member states. The vast disparity in military power warrants that ASEAN member states should invest in resources and capacity building for the long term. Despite being home to one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, their defence budgets remain small. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in 2021, the countries of Southeast Asia collectively spent USD43 billion on defence, accounting for a mere 2% of global defence spending.
25. The incompatibility is also found in their supplier of arms. In the past two decades, Russia has been the largest supplier of arms to Southeast Asia, which has amounted to USD11 billion in sales since 2000, compared to the United States' USD8.4 billion. In addition to the concerns of supplier-based dependence, such incompatibility will create interoperability issues and complicate multilateral operations. Southeast Asia will need to take stock of its capabilities, make viable investments in capacity building and narrow the gaps between its members for seamless cooperation.
26. Thus, to maintain their collective independence vis-à-vis the non-ASEAN states, member countries need to develop the capacity to engage with the Plus-Countries on an equal footing. This should also imply that to avoid overextension of resources, ASEAN should review the state of its multiple forums and potentially consider dismantling those that are no longer needed.
27. Another reflection of institutional weakness is the inability to tackle controversial matters troubling the region. Considering the unlikelihood of resolving issues such as territorial disputes soon, member countries must prepare risk-mitigation measures to manage any accidents or miscalculations. Militaries and defence establishments should take the necessary steps to safeguard against a potential escalation of tensions.

28. This also means that there needs to be stricter adherence to existing agreements and mechanisms. These include the United Nations Convention on the Law of the SEA (UNCLOS), the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea and direct communication links. Beyond policy-level discussions, the ADMM should be enhancing cooperation and relations among the respective militaries as they will most often be the first ones on the ground in responding to an interstate dispute.
29. It bears stressing that some developments remain beyond the immediate control of ASEAN and its related bodies. For instance, major power rivalry, by virtue of their capabilities and influence, will continue to be one of the most crucial sticking points for the resolution of differences and disputes in the region. An overriding and most pressing issue centres on the ongoing Sino-US conflict in respect of the South China Sea, and the related areas of dispute. The evolution of this major power relationship will have implications for the smaller countries in the region, many of which maintain close trade and investment ties to both powers and in some cases security links as well.
30. This does mean that ASEAN would need to keep the United States and China invested in the ASEAN-led security architecture. The operative word here is 'invested', and not keeping them at bay as much as telling the major powers to toe the line is effectively an exercise in futility. This was noted in the stymied progress of the South China Sea dispute-related discussions and declarations during the ADMM-Plus meetings. This has persisted to this day, allowing these great powers to fortify their position in the region.
31. Consequently, we see escalating posturing from the American side, marking the first time in three decades that the Philippines announced giving the United States access to four more military bases, building new facilities and placing armaments.
32. Similarly, China has been making progress in defence relationships, from announced plans to develop an air defence centre and expand a radar system in Cambodia to Malaysia's purchase of Chinese naval vessels. Coupled with the much-discussed Chinese efforts of modernisation across both conventional and nuclear arsenals, these made observers inside and outside of Southeast Asia cautious of their intentions.
33. Meanwhile, we are witnessing other countries such as Japan, India and even those in Europe showing increased interest in the region. While this allows for more opportunities in diversifying partnerships, as declared in their respective iterations of an Indo-Pacific strategy, the increasing number of actors can increase uncertainty.

34. The increasing number of actors also poses additional risks to the theoretical multilateral status quo. The proliferation of minilateral groupings, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, AUKUS and the like, are pulling focus further away from the regional architecture Southeast Asia has been trying and often struggling to maintain as its strategic core.
35. Aside from major power rivalry, there remain protracted and emergent security challenges that have been inadequately addressed at best and ignored at worst in our region. Some of the notable challenges have been border and territorial disputes, illegal migration, refugee flows, and transnational criminal activity. Greater attention should also be given to non-traditional security areas such as health, climate, energy and economic security, as these can further exacerbate weaknesses in governance and administrative functioning.
36. Observers have also highlighted strategic challenges such as the ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the crisis in Myanmar. In the case of the former, while negotiations are ongoing, little tangible progress has been made. Much of this was attributed to the lack of collective interest to see these resolved. For example, countries such as Cambodia, Thailand and Laos do not share equal concern or commitment as Vietnam and the Philippines over the South China Sea's territorial waters.
37. And, of course, Myanmar's evolving situation has been an intractable concern in ASEAN since the coup in February 2021. The absence of a concrete institution-based response shows again the strategically comatose state it is in. In this regard, member states have shown divisiveness over the severity of the institutional response to the military junta and whether they should be recognised. ASEAN's 5-point consensus on this has been seen as utterly ineffective.
38. With such ongoing developments, there are questions about the future of defence cooperation in Southeast Asia and the wider region. It is important to recognise that neither ASEAN nor its member states ever had or will have any common enemies.
39. Considering the state of the region, which has seen arguably more peacetime than otherwise, ASEAN member states and the relevant agencies and entities should be leveraging their military for enhanced and expanded security cooperation, as opposed to restricting them to preconceived expectations of using their military for limited purposes. Quality prevails over quantity here. The overriding question is: How do we

maximise the efficiency of these bodies as opposed to adding to the institutional and bureaucratic bloat?

40. In the case of Malaysia, we should use existing bodies such as FPDA to create opportunities for ourselves and Singapore. There is no gainsaying that FPDA exercises and activities can be more sophisticated and realistic than those of the ADMM and ADMM-Plus. Further, they provide insight into Western militaries' latest concepts and doctrines, supplementing what we gain from our engagements with the United States. Such transfers of know-how are unlikely to happen in the ADMM or ADMM Plus. We should also view the FPDA as providing a countervailing force should any regional country behave or develop unexpectedly.
41. ASEAN should also consider looking to other regions and learning from their successes and struggles. One that has often been overlooked is the African Union and their model of regionalism. The continent has been the location of massive human rights abuses, including genocide, war crimes and crime against humanity, and is still prone to various forms of intra-state violence.
42. Ineffectiveness saw the transformation of the Organisation of the African Union to the African Union, where the legal framework allows the organisation to intervene in a member state, following a decision by the assembly of heads of state, in case of international crimes or when members request intervention to restore peace and security.
43. At the end of the day, much will depend on whether there is the willingness to make difficult decisions for the betterment of these platforms. We must go beyond conventional forms of defence diplomacy and exhibit proactiveness to ensure the region maintains its peaceful stability so we can pursue our national interests. In this vein, we should seek the intersection of economic diplomacy with defence diplomacy. Although the two processes arise from two distinct pillars of Vision 2015, they need not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Success in such an approach would necessarily entail economic progress, not in the zero-sum game sense but in the inclusive framework of shared prosperity, the discourse of which would necessitate another forum.